

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
January 20, 2012
John 2:1-11

“Divine Reluctance”

Anyone who has ever hosted a wedding has probably prayed that they never face the crisis of running out of wine like the poor host and hostess did in today’s story from John. Surely such a fiasco would be talked about the next day. I can just hear it. “Hey were you at the Smith wedding last night? Can you believe they ran out of wine?” What would you do if it happened to you?

Well, it happened at my wedding. Except at mine it was champagne.

By any standard my wedding reception was a lovely affair hosted by my parents at their home. But I knew something was wrong when I didn’t get a glass of champagne after asking for one 3 times. The waiter finally fessed up: “We’ve run out and have had to go to Acme to get more,” he whispered in my ear.

That wasn’t the only thing happened, though. A fuse blew-something that is prone to happen at an old house that is hosting 175 people for dinner-which meant the band couldn’t start playing when they were supposed to. The hot water heater also sprung a leak and flooded the basement floor, which the guests never knew but my parents did when they went looking for the fuse box. And after the guests had gone home someone noticed that my dearly beloved dog Roxanne was missing. Ask Mike sometime about running around the neighborhood in his tails at 2 am yelling, “Roxanne! Roxanne!” It turns out she was in the basement all along . . .hiding behind the busted hot water heater.

My parents survived as did all of the guests . . .no one seemed to miss a beat. Except for the band. But I can guarantee you that if any of Mom’s sons had turned to her in hour of need and said, “Woman, what concern is all of this to you and to me,” well . . .let’s just say it wouldn’t have been pretty.

Back in Jesus’ day the bride and groom celebrated the marriage not with a honeymoon, but with a 7 day wedding feast at the groom’s home. Is it any wonder they ran out of wine?! But back in those days, as it is today, running out of wine before the party was over was a bit of a social faux pas.

Commentators often remark on the extravagance of the miracle because Jesus turned a whole lot of water into wine . . .roughly 757 bottles worth of wine, to be exact. It’s a point that’s hard to miss. But personally, I’ve always stumbled over that sassy retort Jesus gives his mother: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?”

Theologians have a name for this. It is called the scandal of divine reluctance. Why does God the incarnate one hold out? Why doesn’t Jesus want to help?

We can speculate as to why Jesus might not want to help. First and foremost, more wine on day 3 of a wedding party may seem a little frivolous, especially given the fact that many of the guests had probably already had 1 too many.

Or maybe it seems ridiculous to expect Jesus to be a cash and good dispenser, especially with something like wine.

Or maybe Jesus is reluctant because he knows there is a divine plan . . .that indeed his hour has not come . . .so everyone needs to be patient.

Yet, Just as Jesus' mother saw her son as someone who could, and should, meet need, so do many followers of Jesus. We see a world in need, and we believe in a God who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. So why the reluctance to help? In a world where there is so much need, so much suffering, and so much tragedy, why hasn't the hour come?

It's a question as old as Job, "Where is God?"

We ask it on a large scale every time a tsunami or earthquake or hurricane strikes, or a shooting occurs. . .or, well the list goes on and on. But we ask it on a personal level when a loved one dies or there's a terrible accident or a painful divorce or a troubled child or bouts with depression. So it's more than just a philosophical question, this God question. It's very personal, too.

I have been listening all week to the series on NPR titled "Losing our Religion". Perhaps some of you have, too. The series explores the "nones", the growing group of American who, when asked to cite their religious preference, say "none". It's a growing group, now accounting for roughly 1/5 of all Americans. And it's a particularly large group among those under 30, where 1/3 claim to be a "none". It's a group worth studying and taking seriously, especially for a church like this one that wants to remain and strives to be relevant.

Among the nones, there are people who were once religious but who now claim no faith at all. Many of these people lost faith and stopped believing in God when a tragedy hit them. When they asked "where is God", they surmised, "no where to be found." And when they asked why the hour had not yet come, the answer was, "because God the incarnate one doesn't care."

One young man spoke painfully of his mother's cancer diagnosis and eventual death, his father's alcoholism, the abuse that he witnessed firsthand as a child, and his brother's suicide. He prayed, he said, but God never responded.

Another young woman spoke of her brother's death from cancer with similar feelings. Evident in both of their stories is their deep desire to find meaning in these tragedies.

Still others who were interviewed who consider themselves atheist speak of their deep desire to believe in God. When asked if he believes in God, one young man said, "I don't, but I really want to." A mother whose son was shot said, "What kind of God would do this?" She, too, wants to believe in God.

Theologians have a name for this kind of questioning. It's called the theodicy question. How do we reconcile a good and powerful God with the tragedy, injustice and evil in the world? ***How do we reconcile a good and powerful God with the tragedy, injustice and evil in the world?***

Frederick Buechner, that wonderful Christian writer I quote so much, says you cannot reconcile them. You can't have an all-powerful and all good God and say that evil things happen. You can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but you can't reconcile all three. One of them has got to give.

I've shared with you before my own struggles in answering the theodicy question, and my own struggle with the conclusion that I have reached, which is that maybe, just maybe, God isn't all powerful and, therefore, can't do anything to stop evil and suffering from occurring. By the way, I'm still not convinced of this conclusion, but for I now choose to believe that when evil happens and people suffer, God suffers with us.

Other theologians argue that God has created a world in which trouble and evil exist in order that, by virtue of our free will, we might grow in character through the hardship. These people say that God is in the business of soul-making and has an overall plan for us to grow into spiritual maturity through the joys and sufferings of this life.

Other theologians blame evil and suffering on our own free will; in other words, it's our fault, and God can't stop it because that would contradict the freewill God gave us because then it wouldn't be freewill. The free will explanation, by the way, also limits God's power by arguing that God can't take away our freewill.

All of these responses answer the theodicy question differently, but they all agree that God is definitely not the cause of evil and suffering.

But there is another answer to the theodicy question that isn't so quick to let God off the hook. There's one answer that says, "God can do something about evil and suffering, but sometimes, God chooses not to." In other words, what concern is that to me, Jesus says.

It may seem like a travesty to turn a story about God's abundance into a trial of God, and yet it's stories like this one about divine extravagance that make God's absence in the face of poverty and devastation stand out. In a world where desperate mothers say to their small children, "We have no food." Or in many countries, "We have no clean water." Why hasn't the hour come? How do we reconcile the generosity with the need?

If God is both generous and able, then wouldn't it follow that God continues to express Jesus' attitude: What is that to me?

John Roth is a theologian who represents this theology, which is called a theodicy of protest. At its core, this theology insinuates that God may not be totally good. As far as he is concerned, God's supposed sovereignty (control over everything) and omnipotence (power to do anything), means God could and should be able to do something about evil and suffering, but must clearly not want to. In fact, Roth goes so far as to say that God's persistent inactivity means that God is directly responsible for evil and suffering occurring, and that the only reasonable response from us should be to start protesting to God that enough is enough. He also believes we should give up on a false image of God, which suggests that God is benevolent (all-good) and always out to do the best for us. As far as Roth is concerned, God has done too little for too long, especially when one considers the numerous and extensive atrocities committed by humanity to humanity over the course of history.

In light of all this, Roth would say we have a choice. We can either believe in a God that is all good but has limited power, believe in a God that isn't all good but is all powerful. So the question is, "Which God do we choose?" Roth believes we should throw our weight behind the latter, because at least with an all-powerful God we can state our case in the hope that God will turn things around.

In the Bible, we see Job do this in the Old Testament, and we see Mary do it today. Jesus didn't care that the wine ran out until Mary prodded him to do something about. "They have no wine," she said. She noticed it first, or at least brought it to his attention first. She was the first one to be concerned, not Jesus. She prodded him to have compassion and to be generous. In other words, sometimes we need to nudge God to do what is right, and protest to God to do something when things are not.

At this point in the sermon I would like to be able to answer all of the questions that you probably have swimming around your head and tie them up with a neat little bow, but I can't. For starters, as I said earlier, I keep stumbling over Jesus' sassy retort to his mother, and I struggle with my own answer to why there's evil and suffering. But I'm not yet willing to go with Roth's idea, either, that God is all powerful and needs a nudge from us to do the right thing.

But here's what I am willing to do. I am willing to say that there may not be one right answer to the theodicy question. Certainly in the Bible we see times when God who weeps over suffering, but other times is the cause of suffering.

I am also willing to stay with the struggle to answer the question of why evil happens and why there is suffering. I am willing to engage with the struggle, a struggle which I see as a sign of faith, not a lack of one.

And I am also willing to concede that sometimes the old answers that once satisfied us no longer satisfy a new generation, and so it behooves to find new answers, even if we struggle with them. Those 6 stone water jars that stood empty before Jesus filled them with wine, are a great symbol of the emptiness of traditional religious answers. They signify to us that maybe the old ways no longer work.

As to why Jesus decided to fill them with fine wine, we don't really know. But we do know that he did which was, I believe, his way of bringing vitality to an ancient religion. Those empty jugs revealed a religion that lacked vigor and hospitality. But the full ones symbolized life, and generosity, and abundance.

Friends, Any church that wants to remain relevant needs to fill old wineskins with new wine. There is not one right answer as to how to do that; indeed, there will be as many as answers as there are churches, because each one's context is different. But perhaps people wouldn't reject the old religion, and check off "none", if more churches were willing to engage in the struggle as to how to fill old wineskins with new wine.

I can't help but think back to the young man who said, "I don't believe in God, but I really want to."

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Friends, I have said it before, but I will say it again, that there are people in this community, in the country and in this world who yearn for and desperately want to believe in God, who want desperately to believe that God loves them and care for them even when the struggle, and even when they cannot believe, and you have that God offer.

Amen.